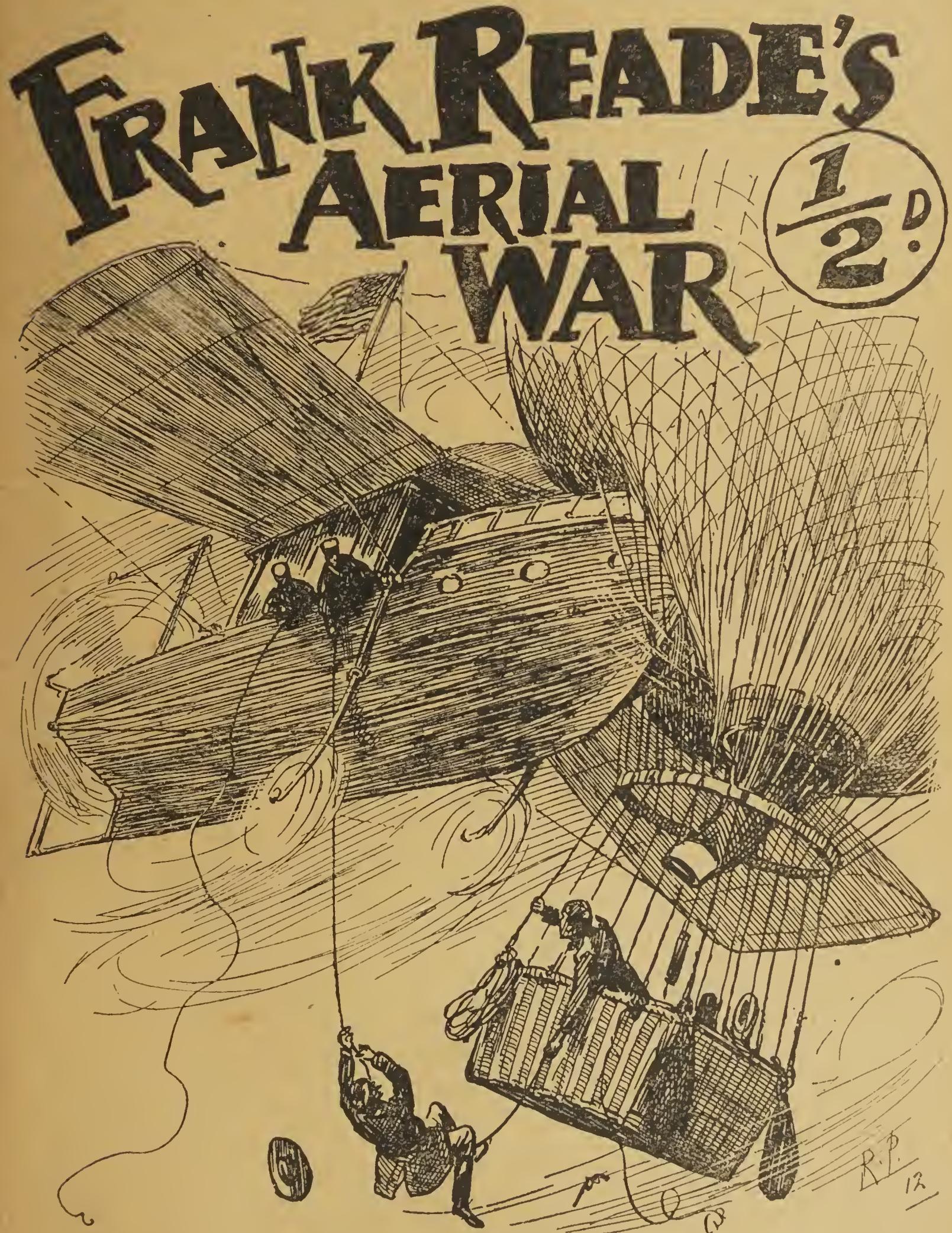


THE INVENTION LIBRARY, No. 31.



As Frank predicted, the bow of the airship struck the centre of the balloon and burst it in.

Frank Reade's Aerial War.

THE STORY OF A STERN CHASE THROUGH THE CLOUDS IN
THE YOUNG INVENTOR'S LATEST AIRSHIP.

CHAPTER 1.

The Outlaw Balloonists.—Frank Reade in Pursuit.—A Tragedy of the Air.

A SHORT time back a robbery was committed in the town of Cranston, U. S. A., by a couple of men, who, when hard pressed by pursuers, sought refuge in a balloon, which carried them up above the clouds.

The incident created a widespread sensation, and the papers had much to say about the new dodge the criminals had resorted to to avoid the officers of the law.

A short time later a little town in Indiana had a similar experience, and a few weeks afterwards a robbery of over two thousand pounds was committed in a town in Ohio, and the robbers again got away by ascending to the clouds and disappearing altogether from sight.

Among the many letters received by Charles Thorne, president of the robbed bank in Cranston, offering suggestions was one which the banker looked over carelessly at first, and then read the second and third time, after which he laid it aside, intending to answer it as soon as possible. But two days passed, and he had forgotten all about it. His son, a youth of nineteen, happened to pick it up, and glanced over it.

"Holy smoke, father!" he exclaimed, "here's a letter from Frank Reade," and he showed him the letter.

"Yes, I received that two days ago. It's some schoolboy, who doesn't know what he's talking about."

"Frank Reade not knowing what he is talking about!" exclaimed Harry Thorne, in amazement. "Why, he is the fellow who went round the world in a flying machine."

"The deuce! Is he the man?"

"Yes. See what he says:

"DEAR SIR.—The balloon robbers can only be caught by pursuit through the air. A flying machine can run them down, and I am putting the finishing touches to one that will, I think, break up the robbing business at one blow. What I wish to know is, do you mean

what you say when you offer a reward for the capture of the balloon robbers? An immediate answer will very much oblige

"Yours truly,
FRANK READE."

"Have you written to him, father?" Harry Thorne asked, when he had finished reading the letter.

"No. I didn't think it worth while to do so at the time; but I will write to him at once and answer his question."

The letter was written, and a few days later another came from young Reade acknowledging the receipt of it, and suggesting that, when the balloon appeared in any part of the country again, the fact should be telegraphed to him without delay, stating also in which direction the wind was blowing at the time, and adding:

"I am ready to start at any moment; but you must keep the fact concealed from the public."

Young Harry Thorne was on tip-toe to see and know all about the flying machine or ship, and he lost no time in writing to ask Frank Reade if he might go down to Readestown and see it. He received a cordial invitation in reply, and at once journeyed to Frank's house. It was too late to visit the huge workshop containing the invention that day, but he spent an enjoyable evening with the young inventor, and rose early the following morning so as to miss no chance of seeing the air-craft.

The delay for breakfast seemed like torture to him. But there is an end to all things, and at last Frank declared that he was ready to take him to the workshop.

Out in the grounds at the back of the house they made their way towards a large gate. Frank took a key from his pocket and unlocked it, revealing a very high boarded inclosure of about one acre in extent. As they passed inside Frank carefully closed and locked the gate.

"Even my neighbours here know nothing about this," he said; "so I keep out everybody except my father and my two men."

"What two men?" Harry asked, looking around the yard.

"Barney and Pomp."

"Oh, yes, I've read of them. They are still with you, are they?"

"Yes, and I guess will stay with me as long as I live."

"There is the ship," the young inventor continued. "You can see her now just as she stands ready to go up at a moment's notice. I have everything on board that would be needed for a long trip through the air."

"How is she run? What is her motive power?"

"Electricity, of course. I pin my faith to that despite what others say. The hull, which is precisely like that of a ship, is twenty feet in length, has a pilot-house, as you see there, and a bow and prow like that of a sailing-ship. Behind the pilot-house is the cabin, with berths for four. Under the cabin is the machinery that gives the motive power that runs the ship. It has a double set of wings—one set for lifting the ship in the air, and the other to propel it in any direction."

He then led the way on board, and Harry saw that everything was constructed of the lightest material consistent with strength.

"Is there not danger of such a light craft giving way under a strain of some kind?" Harry asked.

"She is netted through and through with strong steel wire," replied Frank. "I have provided against danger in that direction."

In the cabin Harry saw four very comfortable berths; also guns and revolvers hanging in proper places ready for use.

"We even have provisions and water on board, ready to go in ten minutes after receiving news of the reappearance of the robber balloonists."

"How do you propose to capture them when you overtake them?" Harry asked.

"If they don't surrender and come on board, we'll fire into their balloon, and that will send them to earth pretty quick. They will be very glad to surrender when they find that we mean business."

After spending nearly an hour in examining the flying machine, Harry and Frank returned to the house, where the young inventor's father handed him a telegram, which had arrived a few minutes before.

Frank tore it open and read it. It was from Bunker Thorne, Harry's father, at Cranton, saying :

"Balloon robbery at Midway this morning. Wind blowing from north-east."

"It's from your father," he said, handing the message to Harry. "I am going to follow that balloon in ten minutes."

Harry read the "wire," and then hastened after Frank.

He found him in the work-yard giving hurried orders to Barney O'Shea, an Irishman, who was hurrying things in first-class style,

whilst Pomp, a burly negro, was giving every assistance.

"All aboard!" cried Frank, and Barney and Pomp sprang on board with the agility of a couple of boys.

"Why don't you come with us?" Frank asked, of Harry, and next moment the banker's son was on board.

"Go into the cabin there, and wait till we get under way," Frank said, pushing him into the cabin and closing the door.

Just one minute later Harry heard a peculiar roaring noise, as of some kind of machinery in operation. Through the windows of the cabin he saw a great canvas wing spread out and make the motions of a bird in the act of flying. Underneath the wing he saw something like smaller wings revolving so fast that he could not make out their exact shape. The next moment he felt the ship shoot upwards into the air, and ere he could realise it he was soaring above the houses and tree-tops of Readestown.

Somehow he couldn't help feeling qualmish. He was going up, up towards the clouds, a thing he believed that nature never intended that man should do. But after Frank had released him and he had stood a while on the open deck of the airship he began to enjoy the sensation.

On and on they went at splendid speed until it began to grow dark. Then Frank decided it was time to encamp for the night.

"I am going to drop down in that little patch of prairie near the river there," he said. "There are no settlements within miles of it. We sha'n't be bothered with visitors, and in the morning we can rise on the wing and continue our search."

When the flying machine was settled down in the grass, Barney and Pomp sprang out. The Irishman hurried off towards the river, and a little later returned with two good-sized fish, which he gave to Pomp to cook. Half an hour later they sat down to a supper of fresh fish, eggs, butter, and coffee.

They were in the air again at the first blush of dawn on the following morning.

Pomp soon announced breakfast, and Barney was placed in charge of the wheel, whilst Frank and Harry sat down to the little table in the cabin. By-and-by, Barney sang out that he saw a balloon.

"Where is it?" cried Frank, rushing out on deck.

"Out there, bedad!" and he pointed in a south-easterly direction to a black speck the size of a man's hat floating lazily about in the air, at least a half-mile above the earth. Frank got his field-glass and took a look at the object.

"Yes, that's it," he said. "That's a balloon."

Then Frank took charge of the wheel, and made straight for the balloon in the distance.

Harry watched the balloon with an eager

interest, whilst Frank held the ship steadily on her course. When the two were about five miles apart Harry made the discovery, having the field-glass in his hands, that the balloon was empty.

"What!" exclaimed Frank. "Do you mean to say that there's no one in the car?"

"Yes; see for yourself," and he handed him the glass.

Frank found that Harry was right. He could not see anyone.

"Well, something has happened, I reckon. We'll go ahead and see what the trouble is."

He gave the glass back to Harry, and bent all his energy to guiding the flying machine straight to the balloon. In due time they came within hailing distance of it.

"There's someone in that car, I am sure," said Frank. "It doesn't swing as though it were entirely empty."

So saying, he guided the ship a little above the balloon in order to enable him to look over into the car.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Harry. "There's a woman lying in the bottom of it!"

"Hallo, there—balloon!" cried Frank, in loud tones.

A young woman sprang up in the car and glared at the flying machine like one in a dream.

"Are you alone?" Frank asked.

She brushed the hair back from her eyes and glared at him as if uncertain whether she was awake or not.

"Oh, save me! Save me, please!" she suddenly cried, bursting into tears.

"Save you from what?" Frank asked.

"I can't manage this balloon. My husband and I ascended yesterday, and while he was trying to arrange some of the ropes last night he fell from the car. Oh! it's horrible. Can't you save me? Can't you stop this balloon?"

"There's only one way," said Frank, "and that is for you to come aboard the flying machine, and then let me perforate the balloon so that the gas will escape and let it down."

"But how can I get on board? Those big wings won't let you get near enough to this car."

"You'll have to tie a rope round your waist, and we will pull you on board."

"Throw me two ropes, please," she said, with grim determination.

"Dar's one, den," said Pomp, throwing her the end of a coil of rope, which she deftly caught and securely tied round her waist.

"Bedad, an' here's anither," put in Barney, tossing her another, which she also caught and tied round her waist.

She then looked over at the four men, and asked:

"What must I do now?"

Frank and Harry held to one rope, and Barney and Pomp grasped the other.

"Jump overboard, and we'll take care of you," replied Frank. "Wait for the word.

Steady, now, all! Now, over with you, madam!"

The brave little woman made the jump and swung out into mid-air. Pulling hard on the ropes the four men drew the half-fainting woman up on the deck of the flying machine, where she lay limp and helpless till Frank took her up and conveyed her into the cabin.

By-and-by she recovered sufficiently to talk quietly, and she repeated her story.

"Now, do you want me to perforate the balloon, madam, and send it down?" asked Frank, when she came to a pause.

"Yes, if you can go down, too, and let me secure my belongings."

"Oh, I can do that easy enough," he replied. "Who is the owner of the balloon?"

"I am now, since my husband is no more."

"Who was your husband?"

"He was known as Professor Bardolph."

"Oh, yes; I remember him," said Harry, who was standing by. "I saw him last year. But I don't remember his being married then."

"No. We have been married but three months," and the poor woman burst into a fresh gush of tears.

Frank and Harry went outside on the deck and looked at the balloon, which had drifted some hundreds of yards away from the flying machine.

"Run up alongside of her again, Barney," said Frank to the Irishman, who was at the wheel.

Barney turned the course of the airship and veered towards the balloon again, whilst Frank went inside and got his rifle. When within twenty yards or so of the balloon Frank fired at it, and instantly the hiss of escaping gas was heard.

Another pair of holes was made, and another and another, after which the great balloon began to go down towards the earth.

Frank gave the rifle to Harry, and took charge of the wheel in order to attend to the task of descending to the earth safely.

The balloon went down almost perpendicularly, as very little wind was blowing at the time, and it was their good fortune to descend in the centre of an uncultivated field.

Barney and Pomp sprang out, and ran to the balloon to secure it, so as to prevent it receiving any further damage.

Madam Bardolph alighted with them, and gave orders like one who knew something about what she was doing. There were several farmhouses in sight of the spot where they went down, and, as might have been expected, in a very little while a crowd of farmers began to assemble. Several of them engaged in a hurried whispered conversation, shaking their heads and looking very determined.

Harry Thorne overheard one of them say:

"I'm betting that it's them, the villains!"

"So'm I," assented another.

Then one of them went away. Half an hour later he returned, accompanied by a half-dozen men armed with rifles.

Frank saw that they were suspected of being the balloon party he was in search of, and told Barney, Pomp, and Harry to make no resistance if arrested. The man who came up with the armed escort was a constable.

"You are my prisoners, gentlemen," he said. "Surrender, or I'll order my men to fire on you."

"Why, what's the matter with you?" Frank asked, looking the constable in the face.

"There's nothing the matter with me," replied the constable. "I arrest you for robbing the bank at Cranston, in Illinois."

Frank laughed.

"Do you know anything about the balloon robbers?" he asked. "Have you no description of them?"

"Yes, I have," said one of the men. "I've got a paper here with a description of the balloon and two of the men in it."

"Well, do you think we are the ones you want to arrest, Mr. Constable?" Frank asked.

"Yes, I do," was the reply. "I don't take any account of newspaper report. The papers are never more than half-right."

"Very well, then. I am Frank Reade junior, the inventor, and I am in pursuit of the very men you take us for. I built this flying machine for that purpose. I saw this balloon in the air, and chased it till I came up with it, to find this lady in it alone; she and her husband, Professor Bardolph, went up from Iuka yesterday. He fell out last night, and she has not seen him since. We rescued her. Now, if you want to take the chances in arresting us, you are at liberty to do so. I will not make any resistance."

The constable seemed to hesitate, and after a whispered conversation the armed men began to move aside. It was plain that they thought they had been a bit too hasty.

"What are you going to do?" Frank asked the constable, after a pause of a minute or two.

"Nothing," was the reply, for now that he was left alone the man saw that he had taken on a bigger task than he could attend to.

"Very well. You'll find that the safest thing to do. This young man here is the son of the banker who was robbed at Cranston. He is going with me in pursuit of the robbers. This lady is the widow of Professor Bardolph. She will want to hire a waggon to take the balloon to the nearest railway-station. Can any of you accommodate her?"

Not one of the farmers answered him, but just then another man came up, an old country merchant well known to all of them.

"Hallo, Frank!" the old merchant exclaimed, on seeing the young inventor. "So it's you, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I'm glad to see you, Mr.

Holmes," and Frank grasped his hand and shook it warmly. "Your neighbours here want to arrest me, taking me to be one of the balloon robbers you have heard so much about in the papers lately."

"That shows that we are all down on robbers here, my boy," said the old merchant. Then, turning to the crowd, he added :

"I know this young man's father well. I've been entertained in his house. Every man of you would be proud to know him if you knew the family as I do."

The constable had nothing to say. He stalked away without making any apology for what he had done, and Frank turned to Mr. Holmes, and immediately got him to promise to attend to the widow and help her to get her balloon home.

That done, he ordered his party aboard again, and immediately sent the flying machine into the air.

They watched the airship till it seemed like a little speck in the sky. Frank ascended a distance of two miles in order to get a good view of the horizon as far as his vision through a large field-glass would reach.

When at the greatest height he surveyed the field, but could see no signs of a balloon in any direction.

Early on the following day they descended on the outskirts of a town on the line of a railway, where Frank went to the telegraph-office to inquire of Mr. Thorne at Cranston if he had heard anything further from the balloon.

"It was seen in Central Missouri yesterday," came back the reply.

Frank informed the banker that his son was with him, and then, returning to the flying machine, lost no time in getting away.

CHAPTER 2.

Barney and Pomp Captives.—Frank Puts a Bully in His Place.—The Right Balloon at Last.

"THOSE fellows have got wind of this flying machine through telegraphic communication in some way, and are making off to a section of country where the telegraph does not go."

"It looks a little that way," said Harry.

"Yes. They may go away out into the south-west, where telegraph wires run only along with the railways. They can go from town to town then, robbing and plundering with impunity."

Before they had gone very far a great eagle swooped down upon them, uttering shrill cries as though in defiance of the monster who had invaded his domain.

Harry sent a well-directed shot into the bird's wing and brought it down with a thud on the ship's deck.

Barney and Pomp fell upon it, and after a

struggle held it ~~a~~ captive. Then, having tied its beak and claws so that it could do no damage, Frank set the injured wing, binding it up in splints with much original skill.

That done, they fastened the huge bird to a post by means of a strong chain, meaning to keep him captive until his wing had healed sufficiently to enable it to fly again.

They pushed on into the great State of Missouri, and when night came on they could see no opening where they could land, save in a cultivated field.

"That won't do," said Frank. "The farmer would have the right to have us arrested for trespass and damage to his crop. We want to avoid everything of that kind."

They found an uncultivated field, however, near the banks of an old mill-pond, and descended there. It was a lonely-looking spot, but answered the purpose admirably.

Pomp had supper ready by the time they were settled down, and they fell to and ate heartily of the fare he had prepared for them.

But they were not there over an hour, when four negroes came down to the pond to fish. The darkies built up a big fire near the water's edge, and began to haul in the fish. They had not seen the flying machine as it lay back from the water a hundred yards or so. To have some fun at their expense, Frank decided to turn an electric light on them, aided by a powerful reflector. The moment the four darkies saw the electric light they were partially blinded by its brilliant glare.

"Wha—what's dat, Eben?" one of them exclaimed, dropping his rod.

"Dunno, Mose," replied Eben. "Nebber see'd dat light afo'."

"I'se er gwine home," exclaimed the third darkie, in faltering tones, and he started to run.

"Don't get scared, boys," called out Frank, in kindly tones. "We are friends."

"Who—who dat?" called out Eben.

"Fishermen, like yourselves," replied Frank.

Pomp then went down to where the four fishermen were, and told them that his three white friends were camping there for the night, and that they would like to do some fishing, too. That quieted them, and they resumed their fishing.

Barney joined them, and bought a good-sized fish for the eagle, which had been named "Uncle Sam."

The eagle would not eat it till morning, when he pounced upon it and devoured it with avidity.

The return of day brought the four fishermen back to the pond. Two dogs accompanied them, one of which, a very inquisitive pup, ran up the gang-plank to the deck of the ship.

Two minutes' rambling around brought him within reach of the eagle. Suddenly the *welkin* rang with the yelps of that pup.

"Uncle Sam," had given him a clutch with his claws, and he made a dash for safety, with the eagle holding on to him. When he reached the end of the chain which held the eagle to the deck the latter's grip tore loose and the pup was free. But he never ceased running and yelping till he reached home, somewhere back in the woods.

"Wha' dat hurtin' dat dog?" Eben asked, as he saw the pup rushing away.

"Dat's er game chicken," said Pomp, laughing.

"Chicken!" exclaimed Eben.

"Yes—er game chicken—what no nigger kin snatch offen de roost."

"G'way dar!"

"Dat's er fac'," said Pomp, "an' youse kin hab 'im ef youse snatch 'im, an' take 'im home wid you."

Frank was about to stop the trick, but it was too late. Eben started up the gang-plank, and reached for "Uncle Sam," and the bird reached for him in return.

"Ouch! Ugh! Take 'im off!" yelled the darkie, leaping about the deck like a madman, and trying to part company with the eagle.

"Knock him off, Pomp!" cried Frank, who did not sympathise with a practical joke of that kind.

Eben ran so far back, however, that the line to which the eagle was tied pulled them apart.

The yells of the negro and the shrill screams of the eagle raised quite a racket for a few minutes.

"What kinder chicken am dat, sah?" Eben asked, turning to Frank.

"That's an eagle."

"A eagul! Sabe us, I'se gwine ter kill that nigger," and he made a rush for Pomp.

Pomp was grinning from ear to ear, and not expecting an attack till Eben had given him a blow that made him groan.

"Lookeeh heah, you nigger," yelled Pomp, "what youse do dat for?"

Eben made another pass at him without making any other reply. Pomp prepared at once for war. His heavy ordnance was his head, and he brought it to bear on the belligerent Eben. He lowered it, and made a forward dash. He collided with Eben, his head striking him in the pit of the stomach, and the belligerent darkie went to grass, knocked out utterly.

"Come aboard, Pomp, and let's be off," called out Frank.

Pomp and Barney both went on board, and then the lifting machinery began to roar, the great wings expanded, and the negroes' eyes nearly popped out of their heads. But when the flying machine shot up in the air, the four negroes were so terrified that they fell on their knees and began to shout like lunatics.

About noon of that day Frank caught sight of a balloon in the distance, and went for it.

FRANK READE'S AERIAL WAR.

with all the speed he could put into the flying machine.

"I guess that's the balloon we are after," he said, as he took another look at it.

"I reckon you're right," agreed Harry. "That must be the balloon."

"I'm quite sure of it. But I don't like that thunder-cloud coming up out there. If we have a storm it may spoil the pursuit. The balloon can go with the wind without any trouble. But this airship has wings which a violent wind might wrench and render useless."

From that moment Harry kept his eye on the black cloud which was coming up from the south-east. By-and-by the airship began to show signs of feeling the fitful gusts of wind that came from the cloud, and Frank noticed that the balloon was showing increased speed.

The wind grew in violence, and the airship rocked from side to side as if in trouble.

At one time it made a plunge as if about to take a header towards the earth, and Pomp came near losing his balance and going overboard. He saved himself by grasping a piece of rope which was fastened to a ring-bolt. The balloon was rising higher and higher, whirling round like a top at times at the mercy of the wind. The ship came within a mile of it, and allowed them to count the number of men in the car.

"There are four of 'em there," said Harry.

"Yes, four. That's a pretty heavy load, but it's a big balloon."

"Yes--ouch! Look out!"

The airship made another lurch, and Harry was hurled against the side of the pilot-house with great force.

"By George!" exclaimed Frank. "We must descend. Another wrench like that and something may give way," and he began to lower the number of revolutions of the lifting wings.

The airship descended, and as it neared the earth the violence of the wind seemed to decrease. A large field of growing corn lay just below them, and they had to land there, having no option in the matter. It struck harder than Frank designed, and Harry was thrown to the floor by the force of it.

"I hope no damage is done," Harry said, as he picked himself up.

"So do I," added Frank, "but I'm afraid something has given way."

Barney and Pomp immediately sprang overboard to see if any damage was done. But ere they could make any special inspection a great downpour of rain began, and they had to get on board again. The rain came down in such torrents that sight of the now fast-receding balloon was cut off entirely.

The wind continued to blow for some time. But it ceased ere the rain ended.

Frank made a close inspection, however, in spite of the rain, and found that nothing had been broken.

"I am going to rise again in a few minutes," he said.

"I wonder if the balloon passed through the storm all right?" said Harry, when they were once more in the air.

"I don't see why they should not," replied Frank. "All they had to do was to sail before the wind. As long as they keep above the earth they are safe."

"Have you any idea how fast the wind blew at its best when we came down?"

"I guess it was fully sixty miles an hour."

"Whew! And we were down in that corn-field over two hours!"

"Yes, giving them another start of over one hundred miles," remarked Frank.

The airship went in the direction the wind was blowing, and ere night came on they had placed nearly one hundred miles between them and the spot where they last saw the balloon.

"We may as well drop down there by that stream," said Frank. "There's an open prairie near it, where we may be able to find some game in the morning."

As soon as they had landed Harry and Frank took their guns and went in pursuit of game. Half a dozen shots brought down four prairie hens, and Barney lost no time in gathering them in.

With the instincts of a true sportsman Harry suggested that they follow up the flock and get a few more. Frank agreed, as the twilight had not yet set in. Three more fat hens was the result, and Barney took charge of these also, and carried them to Pomp.

When he reached the deck of the airship he was attacked by a couple of bearded white men, who covered him with revolvers, and ordered him to hold up his hands.

"Phwat's the matther wid yez?" Barney demanded, gazing at the two strangers in astonishment.

"Hold up your hands, or I'll make holes in you!" hissed one of the men.

Barney had to obey.

"Great Scott!" gasped Harry, who happened to look in the direction of the airship at that moment. "There's two men on the deck there holding Barney up!"

Frank glared at the scene like one in a dream.

"Yes," he said, "and they have tied Pomp up, too, I guess. We have our revolvers and rifles, and they have their rifles. We'll have to get into the woods to save ourselves."

They made a rush for the woods without more ado.

"We are safe now," said Frank. "We can creep up near enough to get a shot at them if they show themselves out on deck."

They crept towards the airship under cover of the trees, till they got within forty yards of it. There they halted and watched the two men who were inside the cabin. They could be seen through the windows, and our

heroes made the discovery that two more were in there, showing at least four foes they would have to conquer ere they regained possession of the airship.

"This is bad business," whispered Frank to Harry. "I don't know what to think of it. I don't know whether they are the balloon crowd or not. But, whoever they are, they are going to fight for the ship."

"Why can't we pick 'em off when it grows darker?" Harry asked.

"Just what I am going to try to do," was the reply.

They drew away until it grew darker; then they once more crept nearer to the airship. By-and-by a rain storm threatened, and it grew so dark that nothing could be seen save the light in the cabin.

They crept forward till the hull of the airship was reached. A flash of lightning revealed a man on the deck on guard. His face was towards the cabin, hence he did not see them. By a very careful movement Frank got a sight of him, and at a distance of five or six feet gave him the contents of one of the barrels of his rifle.

The man fell without a groan. But the report brought the other two out in hot haste to the assistance of their companion.

As they opened the door of the cabin they were plainly revealed to Harry and Frank, who fired point-blank at them. They both fell right at the threshold, and Barney gave a whoop—a wild Irish whoop—for he knew that the end was near. The fourth man sprang to his feet in the cabin, and levelled his revolver at Barney's head, hissing:

"Another sound from you and you are a dead man!"

Frank opened the door and levelled his revolver at the man, who turned ashen hued in the face.

Harry covered him also with his gun, one barrel of which was loaded.

"Drop that gun and hold up your hands!" ordered Frank.

The order was promptly obeyed, and then Barney gave another whoop.

Pomp also sprang up and sang out:

"Cut me loose, Marse Harry! Cut me loose—quick!" and he turned round so as to let Harry see how his hands were tied behind him.

Harry very promptly cut him loose, and then performed the like service for Barney.

"Whoop! L'ave 'im to me!" yelled Barney. "L'ave me git at 'im, the spa'peen!" and he charged on the ruffian and gave him a staggering blow in the face with his fist.

The man recovered himself quickly, and drew an ugly-looking knife. He would have ended Barney's career then and there had not Pomp made a charge on him.

Pomp's woolly head struck him in the side, and sent him clear through the cabin door to the floor of the deck.

He rolled against Uncle Sam, the eagle, and the fierce bird at once fastened on to him.

"Whoop!" yelled Barney, taking down the lantern inside, and bringing it out so as to get a sight of the combat. "L'ave the aigle be! L'ave the aigle be! Bedad, but it's a foine birrud for a ruction, he is!"

The man rose to his feet and grappled with the eagle, having lost his knife when he was butted out of the cabin.

He got hold of its neck and gave it a wrench that broke it, and that ended the fight.

Victor though he was the man was a sight to look at. The eagle's back and claws had done terrible work, and he was bleeding from a score of small wounds.

"Hold up your hands," said Frank, levelling his pistol at him. "Barney, tie him hard and fast," he added, when the man sullenly obeyed.

"Now, what does all this mean?" Frank demanded of the prisoner, when he was tied. "Do you belong to the balloon gang?"

"Balloon gang! I don't know nothing about no balloon gang," was the reply.

"You haven't had anything to do with a balloon?"

"No. Are you a lunatic? What's a balloon got to do with this game, I'd like to know?"

"Well, I'll see if I can't find out something more about it in the morning," said Frank. "We'll have to keep you tied up till then, however."

The prisoner said nothing more. He knew that he had little claim for consideration at the hands of the two young men.

Pomp and Barney took up the bodies of the three robbers and laid them out on the grass. Barney then brought pails of water from the river and washed away all signs of the tragedy, whilst Pomp busied himself with the delayed preparations for supper.

During the evening, Frank, by dint of close questioning, managed to get some information out of his prisoner.

They were a part of a band of bandits who had long been a terror to the sparsely-settled sections of the state.

"I have done no wrong, then," said Frank, with some degree of satisfaction.

"No," added Harry. "I guess the state would strike a medal in our honour if it were known that we had wiped out three of the villains."

When morning came, Frank and Harry found the four horses belonging to the outlaws, and knew then that they were not in any way connected with the balloon rascals.

"That lets him out," said Frank to Harry. "I reckon he's punished enough as he is. Uncle Sam went for him for all he's worth."

Breakfast being over Frank went and spoke to the prisoner.

"We are going to resume our trip," he said. "If we release you, will you bury your

companions and then stop this sort of business?"

"Yes, and I'll swear it, too."

"Of course, we expected to hear you say that. I suppose you'd promise to go and hang yourself to get away from the officers of the law?"

"Yes, any fool would."

Frank laughed heartily, and told him he could go, and then he turned and entered the pilot-house, where he set the machinery in motion.

The airship shot up into the air and bore away in the direction the balloon had taken.

On the following day they came in sight of a balloon in the distance. They made direct for it, and after two hours they were near enough for Frank to see that there were only two persons in the car. He was astonished to find that the passengers were a man and woman.

The ship drew nearer and nearer to the balloon, till the faces of the occupants could plainly be seen.

"What balloon is that?" Frank called.

"Professor Noel's, of St. Louis," was the reply.

"Where bound?"

"California, if the wind is kind to us."

"Have you seen any other balloon lately, professor?" Frank asked, after a pause of some moments.

"No, I have not."

After a little more talk our friends bade adieu to the professor and his wife, and sheered off.

"Which way now?" Harry asked.

"Across the wind," was the reply. "That storm blew them somewhere out here, and I am going to hang on till I see them."

Just as the sun was sinking below the horizon they caught a glimpse of a western border town on the banks of a river.

"There's where I want to stop to-night," said Frank, "if we can do so without being seen."

"There's a good place to land below the town," replied Harry, looking through the glass. "But it will be very dark ere we can reach it."

"Just what I want. I want to drop down there and walk into town to the telegraph-office without the presence of the ship being suspected by anyone. We don't want the whole population turning out to bother us about the thing."

Darkness came on, and the lights of the town alone enabled Frank to locate it and guide the ship to the spot where he wanted to land.

"Now, Barney," he said to the Irishman, as soon as the landing was effected, "Harry and I are going up into the town. You and Pomp remain here, and don't let anybody come on board till we return. So that we shall be able to find you hang out a red lantern."

Harry and Frank left the ship, and made their way through the darkness towards the town. A walk of about half a mile brought them into the heart of it.

They found several saloons in full blast, and a crowd of rough-looking border men in them, drinking, smoking, singing, and otherwise making merry.

Harry remained outside one of these saloons, while Frank went inside, bought a cigar, and asked the saloon keeper if there were a telegraph-office in the town.

"No," was the reply. "Every galoot in this town is er whole telegraph himself. We don't need no telegraph in this 'ere town, mister."

"Who wants er telegraph?" asked a man somewhat under the influence of drink, coming up to the bar alongside of Frank.

"I do," said Frank, very promptly. "I wanted to send a dispatch to New York."

"Why don't you write? Hang the telegraph. Gimme a glass o' cold 'pisen,' Joe."

The barkeeper set out a black bottle and two glasses, asking Frank what he was drinking.

"I never drink," replied Frank.

The man who had called for the drink looked hard at the sun-embrowned face of the young man, and remarked:

"Never drink, eh?"

"No, I never drink intoxicating liquors of any kind."

"Waal, you'll drink a glass o' cold 'pisen' with Bill Moss," and he shoved the bottle over towards him after filling his glass.

Frank deliberately turned away and started towards the door.

"Say, you!" called out the man, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him suddenly round. "You drink with me, or I'll fill you full of lead! Do yer hear me?"

"And I suppose you want me to pay for it, too, don't you?" Frank very coolly asked.

"Yes, you tenderfoot. Drink, or you'll never see sunrise ag'in!"

"Landlord, what's the liquor in that bottle worth."

"One dollar," was the reply.

Frank promptly threw down a dollar on the bar, drew his revolver, cocked it, and levelled it at the head of Bill Moss.

"You overgrown prairie dog!" he hissed. "If you don't raise that bottle and swallow every drop in it without flinching, I'll make as many holes in you as ever a wasp-nest had! Drink, I say!"

The bully was dumfounded at the sudden change in the personality of the youth. But he was not the only one astonished. The barkeeper and all the spectators were equally amazed.

Frank had the drop on Bill, and Bill decided that the best thing for him to do was to take a drop on himself. So he turned up the black bottle, which was nearly full of the miserable

Western whisky, and drank down every drop of its contents.

"Now, do you want any more out of me?" Frank asked, looking him full in the face.

"No," stammered the bully. "I've got too much in me now."

"Then cut a notch on your ear to remind you that you are liable to make a mistake sometimes when sizing up a stranger. You're not quite as much of a telegraph as you thought you were."

Harry came walking in, and the crowd looked hard at him, as if sizing him up.

"There's no telegraph-office in the town, Harry," said Frank, turning to him.

"That's bad," returned Harry. "We'll have to write."

"Yes. How about the mails here? How often do they come and go?"

"Twice a week, stranger," replied the proprietor.

"Jerusalem! What do you people do here for news?"

"Drink whisky and fight," replied one of the party.

"That's amusement, not news," said Frank.

"It don't suit you, though, eh?" the same man asked.

"Hardly."

"Then you don't want to stop here long, mister."

"That depends on how I like the town when I see it by daylight," retorted Frank. "This is a free country, where a man can go where he likes, and stay as long as he wishes when he behaves himself."

"Yes, that's so," assented half a dozen at once. But the other fellow didn't agree. He wanted to intimate to Frank that if he didn't like the town he had better get out of it as quickly as possible.

Frank was not to be cowed by bluster. The man who was disposed to pick a quarrel with him was a friend of the one whom the young inventor had forced to drink the bottle of whisky. The man, however, saw that none of the crowd were disposed to back him in a row, and so he subsided and walked away to the further end of the saloon.

At last Frank decided to treat the crowd, and told the barkeeper to "set 'em up." A whoop went up from the crowd as they rushed to the bar and called for their favourite drinks. Even the man who had tried to pick a quarrel with Frank came up and called for a glass.

Frank talked with the quieter ones of the crowd when he got a chance, and learned the name of the town and some of the characteristics of the people.

"Did you see a balloon the day before yesterday?" he asked.

"No," was the reply. "Were there any up in this part of the state?"

"Well, we saw one a long way off two days ago, and from the direction of the wind I

thought it might have passed over this town."

"I reckon it didn't, though," said the man.

By-and-by Frank and Harry left the saloon and wended their way back towards the ship.

Directly after supper Harry and Frank retired, leaving Barney and Pomp to divide the night guard between them.

They were preparing to ascend on the following morning when Harry suddenly exclaimed:

"Great Scott, Frank, look at that balloon!"

Frank sprang up and looked in the direction of the river.

A few hundred yards up a great balloon was ascending from a point beyond the river, and floating south-eastward.

"That's our balloon, Harry," cried Frank, after gazing at it in silence for a minute or two.

"Yes, I guess it is."

"Well, we'll go for it! All aboard!"

Once well up in the air Frank seized his glass and levelled it at the balloon.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I know one of those fellows."

"The deuce you do!" said Harry.

"Yes, look and see if you can't recognise one of them," and he handed the glass to Harry, who took it and levelled it at the balloon.

He was silent for a couple of minutes, and then remarked:

"One of them looks like that chap you forced to empty that bottle last night."

"Yes, he's the very fellow. That's Bill Moss, as he called himself. They are the balloon crowd, and they must have gone down in the night time, so the people didn't know anything about them."

"Yes, and they may have committed robberies in the village last night. By George! they've turned a glass on us! They seem to be worried, and are rising higher every moment."

"We can rise as high as they can," said Frank Reade. "Let 'em go as high as they please."

The balloon men threw out more ballast, and the great balloon rose rapidly, going up in great bounds. But the airship rose with it, and in a very few minutes both were more than a mile above the earth.

Yet they continued to ascend, and in a little while fully two miles lay between them and the earth. Harry began to grow uneasy, and remarked:

"I hope they won't go any higher. It's getting dangerous."

"Two miles is a great height," said Frank. "But the danger is no greater than two hundred yards. As well fall two or three miles as two or three hundred yards."

"Yes, I suppose so; but still I'd feel better if we were not so high."

"It makes no difference with me. I'm

going to go as high as they do, unless that balloon runs away with them."

"I guess it's doing that now," said Harry.

Nearly another mile was added to the height, and still the balloon ascended.

Frank suddenly noticed that the machinery did not work as well as usual. It seemed that the rarefied air at that great height had some deterring effect on the electric batteries.

"Hold on to this wheel, Harry," he said to his companion, "whilst I go below and see what the trouble is."

Harry did as requested, and Frank went below to make an inspection of the batteries.

When he came back to the pilot-house he saw that the balloon was at least half a mile above the airship.

"They're getting away from us, Harry," he remarked. "I don't understand it. We ought to go as high as they do, though they work on a different principle."

"Aren't we sinking?" Harry asked.

"I don't know whether we are or not. The balloon may be going up faster. We'll know in a little while."

Half an hour passed, and the balloon was still farther away and the earth was nearer. Frank's face was a picture to look at as he made the discovery. Harry was watching him very closely, and was trembling in his shoes for fear of an accident. Suddenly he asked:

"Are we in any danger?"

"None that I can see," was the reply. "But I do fear that this thing is a failure. We can't go up there after that balloon."

"But we can keep along between them and the earth, and they can't stay up there always, you know."

"That's true—we may catch them yet, if they don't get away from us in the darkness. There's our greatest danger."

"Perhaps we can keep near enough to them to keep 'em in sight."

"Yes, if we can keep them between us and the stars. But if rain clouds come up and obscure the stars we shall lose sight of 'em."

Hours passed and the balloon was still above them. Then the wind changed, and both floated towards the south-west. All night long the pursuit was kept up, and when the stars began to fade away the balloon was still floating high up above the flying machine.

CHAPTER 3.

The Fight in the Air.—Ramming the Balloon. —Captured at Last.

DURING the day the wind increased, and the two floated along towards the south-west at the rate of twenty miles an hour.

"They can't carry much food and drink with them in the car of that balloon," said Frank, looking up at the fugitives. "They can't hold out much longer. They may try to give us the dodge to-night."

All day long the pursuit continued, and late in the afternoon they were passing over a wide expanse of prairie land.

"It begins to look as if we were bound for Mexico," remarked Harry.

"Yes, and we'll get there, too, if the wind lies in that direction two or three days and we keep on going."

The sun went down, the stars came out, and the balloon still floated high up above everything.

"Now we'll slip up a mile or so nearer to them, and keep them in sight," said Frank. "If they try to give us the dodge to-night, we'll run into them and perforate the balloon with bullets."

The airship gradually ascended till they were up at a very high altitude again. True to expectation, the balloon began to descend.

"We'll go down, too, so as to have them as near the earth as possible when we call on them to surrender," said Frank, grimly.

They both descended to within half a mile of the earth, when the balloon suddenly shot upwards again.

Frank Reade immediately followed.

"Hallo, there!" he cried, in loud, bantering tones. "Why don't you wait for company?"

"Don't want any company," was the reply.

"But we want to see you on business."

"This ain't a business party. We're out for pleasure."

"Where are you bound?"

"Wherever the wind blows."

"Well, I guess we'll go that way, too," said Frank. "As long as we are going in the same direction we might as well go together."

The balloon ascended higher and higher, and the ship had to do some climbing, too, in order to keep it in sight. Thus the night passed, and morning found them about half a mile apart.

But in the afternoon a dark cloud came up in the south-east, and the wind set in from that direction soon after. The course of the balloon was changed to a north-westerly direction, and the airship followed suit.

"This will take us to Salt Lake City if it keeps steadily in that direction," said Frank. "But we'll go wherever they go, unless it's out to sea."

"I don't believe they would go out to sea themselves."

"They would go anywhere to get away from us. They know that this airship aims to take them to prison, the one place in the wide, wide world they don't want to go to."

"Hanged if they're not coming down again!" cried Harry.

"Yes, so they are! Something is the matter!"

"Let 'em get below us before you start for 'em, Frank," suggested Harry.

"Yes. I was thinking of that," said Frank. "I want to see if they mean to land. If they

do, we'll go down and give 'em a square fight."

"It would be man to man—four against four."

The men in the car of the balloon seemed to be very much excited over something, and one of them was seen to be tugging at a rope as they descended. Suddenly the downward course of the balloon was arrested, and it appeared to be on the rise again.

"Now's our chance," said Frank. "We'll demand a surrender. Get your guns."

Harry, Barney, and Pomp got their rifles. Barney brought one into the pilot-house for Frank. The airship descended till it was nearly on a level with the balloon.

"Go down to the ground," cried Frank, "or we'll make bullet-holes in your balloon."

"You can't make any holes in it," said the spokesman, who proved to be the Bill Moss whom Frank had met in the town they last stopped at.

"Don't flatter yourself on that score. We have rifles."

"Bullets won't go through silk unless there is something behind it to resist it."

"When we find that we can't make holes in your balloon, we'll try our hands at making holes in you. We've come for you, and you may just as well come down at one time as another."

"That's a game two can play at," said another one of the party. "We've got rifles, too," and each of the four men raised a rifle to show that he had one.

"Come back into the pilot-house," said Frank to his party. "They can't hit us there."

All obeyed with alacrity, and then Frank ordered them to fire at the balloon. They did so, but if it had any effect on the huge silk surface, they could not see it. The balloon continued to rise higher and higher.

"The distance is too great," said Frank. "If we get in close range the bullets will go through the silk. At present the soft pressure of the gas inside causes the silk to give way till the force of the bullet is spent. Look out! They're going to fire!"

Two bullets struck the pilot-house and went through the woodwork. Another struck the deck.

"Give 'em a volley!" said Frank.

Barney rose up and aimed at the basket-car under the balloon and fired. One of the men dropped his rifle overboard and sank down in the car.

"By George, but he downed one of them!" exclaimed Harry. "This is horrible!"

"How horrible?"

"The taking of human life."

"They are criminals whom it's right and proper to shoot down when they resist arrest."

"That may be all true, but I don't want to do it, all the same."

"Nor do I. But they began it, and I'm going to give them their fill of it," and the young inventor snatched up a rifle and was about to aim at the car, when one of the men in it lost his balance and fell overboard.

Both balloon and airship were over half a mile in the air now, and the man who tumbled went whirling over and over in his downward course, one long, wild, piercing scream escaping him.

A shudder of horror passed through them as they gazed downwards at the terrible sight. Just as Frank was going to hail the balloon again, the man who had been shot was thrown overboard by the two survivors, and again those on board the ship gazed downward to see the body strike the earth. This lightened the balloon to such an extent that it went bounding upwards so rapidly that ere Frank was aware of it it was completely out of range of his rifle.

"They've got clear away from us again," he said, as he looked up at the balloon. "But we'll hang on to the last."

As soon as it was dark enough to prevent its being seen by those in the balloon Frank sent the airship up nearly two miles. Thus he managed to keep the balloon in sight till he discovered, about midnight, that it was making a rapid descent.

"Now's our time. Stand ready with your guns!" ordered Frank.

Barney and Pomp were on the forward-deck in front of the pilot-house. Harry went inside and stood near the wheel with Frank. The airship went right at the balloon, and in two or three minutes would have run into it had not a species of whirlwind interfered in a most remarkable manner. The balloon suddenly began to whirl round and round and rise rapidly, leaving the airship to pass under it. The whirlwind gave the airship's great wings a twist that managed to throw her on her side.

"Oh, saba us!" groaned Pomp, dropping his rifle and grabbing a ring-bolt. His gun went overboard and was lost, whilst he barely saved himself. Barney caught a rope with one hand and held on to his gun.

Inside the pilot-house Harry demonstrated that if he had been outside on the deck he would have gone overboard. As it was, he came very near going through the sides of the pilot-house, so hard did he strike it when the airship lurched.

Fortunately the lurch threw her out of the current, and she floated away some distance ere Frank got control of it again.

"That was a narrow escape," Frank said.

"Bad cess till it!" said Barney, looking round after the balloon, which had drifted some way in the fierce whirlwind.

It soon grew larger as the airship drew nearer to it, and in three or four hours they were again within a mile of the balloon, which was almost directly above them.

During the afternoon the balloon came down low enough for a parley.

"Say you!" called out the man Moss from the balloon.

"Well, what is it?" Frank responded, at the top of his voice.

"What do you fellows want?"

"We want you and your balloon to deliver to the sheriff of Cranston."

"What does he want us for?"

"Robbery."

"You don't want us, then, for we're not robbers."

"Perhaps; but why not come down and prove it?"

"We prefer to stay up here."

"No doubt of it. But I'm going to hang on to you till I get you."

"You'll hang a mighty long time, then," came back the answer, and then a pause of some minutes ensued. Finally Moss sang out again :

"What do you want to stop following us?"

"Nothing but you and your balloon."

"What reward do you expect to get?"

"The satisfaction of seeing you behind prison bars," was the prompt reply.

"I'll give you a good sum to go away."

"Not much. I'm going to take you back to Cranston, dead or alive."

"I say, Frank," said Harry, "don't you notice that cloud over there?" and he pointed to a black cloud in the south-east which was expanding in a way that looked dangerous.

"I've had my eye on it for ten minutes," was the reply. "It means mischief, I'm afraid."

The balloon ascended higher. Moss saw the cloud in the south-east, and conceived the novel idea of trying to rise above it, hoping that the storm which it carried would strike the airship, and either destroy it or else drive it to earth. The cloud increased in size, and became more threatening every moment.

"Frank, be prudent and go down," said Harry, as he listened to repeated rolls of thunder in that direction.

"I don't think we have anything but a shower to look for there," remarked Frank.

"There may be a fierce wind in it for aught you know," replied Harry.

"Dat's er fac," put in Pomp, who didn't want to tackle any more whirlwinds in mid-air.

Just then Frank felt a fresh breeze from the cloud, and noticed that the great wings were affected by it in a measure. He gazed at the cloud in silence for a moment or two, and then decided to go down. The airship was directly over a river at the time. It was necessary to sail beyond the south bank in order to get at the open prairie. In passing over the timber they heard howls and yells that might have come up from the bottomless pit.

"Great Scott!" gasped Harry. "What is that?"

Barney and Pomp proceeded to make inspection at once.

"Dem Injuns, Barney!" said Pomp, even before he caught sight of the encampment in the timber.

"Bedad, an' it's roight ye are, Pomp. The red naygurs are afther thinkin' it's a spirit from the sky we are."

"Dat's er fac," assented Pomp, as he discovered a band of Indians below, who were frightened almost out of their wits at the flying machine.

They were whooping, yelling, and howling like so many lunatics, as they gazed up at the airship.

"Are they in war-paint?" Frank asked, from the pilot-house.

"No, sah, dey ain't," replied Pomp.

"Then they won't trouble us," and he proceeded to let the airship settle down in the open prairie, about a quarter of a mile from the Indian camp.

They had not been down two minutes ere the storm broke upon them with tremendous fury.

The wind blew fierce and strong, and the rain came down in blinding torrents.

Thunder pealed forth, and shook the very earth, whilst keen, sharp flashes of lightning splintered two trees in the edge of the timber.

It was a terrific display of the mighty forces of Nature, but it soon passed away in a steady downpour of rain.

Frank lost sight of the balloon ere he made the landing. The black cloud seemed to have shut out all view of it long before the storm burst.

"This fierce wind will blow them fifty miles an hour," replied Harry.

"Very likely."

"They'll make a landing somewhere then, and hide the balloon till we go home in disgust."

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," returned Frank. "We've not started home in disgust yet."

"No, not yet, but I reckon we shall be doing it soon."

"That's because you don't know Frank Reade as well as I do," observed Frank.

Harry laughed.

"Well, I may be wrong," he said; "but it looks pretty hopeless to me. The Indians may change their minds, and pay us a visit."

Frank laughed.

"You don't know much about the redskins," he said. "They wouldn't come about us for two or three days, and not then unless somebody explained this thing to them. They're frightened out of their wits."

His words proved true.

The rain ceased, and the clouds began to break away.

The Indians came out to the edge of the timber, and gazed at the flying machine in awestruck silence.

"Dar's dat balloon!" cried Pomp, pointing upwards at an angle of about forty-five degrees.

Frank and Harry glanced up, and were amazed to find that the balloon was almost in the same position as before the storm.

"How do you account for it, Frank?" Harry asked.

"Very easily. They were above the storm, and didn't feel any of the effects of it at all."

"That's strange."

"Not at all. I've read of balloons being up above the clouds, whilst between them and the earth a great storm of wind, rain, thunder, and lightning raged. This is a case of that kind."

Frank hurriedly went through the airship, and examined every bolt and screw to make sure that none were out of order. Finding everything in order he went into the pilot-house and prepared to start up again.

"Why not wait and see if the balloon is going off anywhere?" suggested Harry.

"Yes, that's a good idea. I will wait. We can easily overtake her."

They waited an hour or two longer, during which time the balloon slowly floated eastward.

"All aboard!" Frank suddenly shouted, and the next moment he set the machinery in motion, and sent the airship upwards.

The balloon travelled fast all day long, and the ship followed a mile lower, keeping pace with it. When night came on a dead calm settled down upon them, and both floated within sight of each other till morning.

Then came another whirlwind that struck the balloon, and gave it some rough twisting. At one time it was jerked round so vigorously that everything in the car was thrown out. The two men saved themselves by being lashed to the ropes. Three rifles and some blankets went down, and were seen no more, for they fell in a lake, over which they were passing at the time.

"That disarms them," said Frank, with some degree of relief.

"Yes. They may have their revolvers, though."

"But our rifles will give us a very big advantage."

Frank moved away from the path of the whirlwind, and sent the ship bounding upwards till they were not more than one hundred yards distant from the balloon.

"Now fire at the balloon, Pomp," he ordered.

Pomp blazed away with a rifle, but it could

not be seen that the bullets had any effect on the triple silk.

"Nearer still," and he was within seventy-five yards.

Pomp fired again, and the sound of escaping gas was heard.

"Whoop!" yelled Barney. "That settles the spalpeens!"

"Don't shoot any more, Pomp," said Frank. "That ought to compel them to go down slowly."

Moss and his companion sprang up, and began emptying their revolvers at the airship. But the distance was too great for any damage to be done.

"I'm going to charge her," said Frank. "Our bow will strike her square in the centre. Stand ready to pull 'em on board if they want to save themselves."

The ship made a straight run towards the balloon, and, as Frank predicted, the bow struck the centre of the balloon and burst it in. That caused the car to swing back and forth so violently that both men were thrown out of it.

But Barney and Pomp had each thrown a rope to the men.

Both grasped the means of succour extended to them, and were with great difficulty drawn on board the airship. They were weak from starvation.

"Water! Water! Gimme water!" they both exclaimed, as soon as they reached the deck.

Harry led the way into the cabin, and gave them each a drink and some food. They ate like ravenous wolves, and would have killed themselves had they been allowed food enough. Frank came in with Barney and Pomp, and Moss looked hard at him.

"I wish I had known who you were when I first saw you," he growled.

"Well, to make sure that my plans are not interfered with you two must be bound."

"Oh, there's no need of that. We won't make any trouble."

"I'm taking no chances on that," declared Frank: and so Barney and Pomp tied them up hard and fast, and then went out to see to capturing the balloon, which had struck against the top of an old dead cottonwood-tree.

The rigging had caught in the tree-top, and a terrible crash was the result. Part of the tree snapped, but the balloon was torn so badly that the gas escaped, and the great expanse of silk hung limp to the dead cottonwood.

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"Well, here's a go!" exclaimed Harry.

"Yes, and a bad one," added Frank. "We'll have to land and cut down that tree."

Barney and Pomp brought two axes from the ship and went to work. It was an immense trunk, fully four feet in diameter, hence it took them hours to bring it down.

When it fell it shook the earth and damaged the balloon badly. But they went to work to get as much of it out of the wreck as they possibly could.

Night came on and put a stop to their work, and they returned to the airship to eat and get a good night's sleep. The two prisoners had been given food at intervals of two hours, and were now sleeping better than at any time since they discovered they were being pursued.

Early the next morning they went at the task of securing the balloon, and by noon had got all the silk and ropes out of the wreck. The car was smashed so completely that they did not attempt to do anything with it.

"Now, what shall we do with it?" asked Frank. "We can't carry such a load with six men."

"Leave Barney and me here with it," said Harry, "and we'll camp by this river till you return for us."

Frank grasped his hand.

"Thank you, Harry," he said. "You have good judgment and plenty of pluck. I'll take the prisoners to the nearest town, leave them there, and then return for you."

Leaving weapons and plenty of ammunition with them, Frank and Pomp took the airship and the two prisoners, and set out for the east. They pushed straight ahead as fast as they could.

All night long they sailed, and the next morning came in sight of a border town.

"There's our resting-place," said Frank, and he at once proceeded to descend right in the heart of the town.

Of course, the people were dumfounded at seeing such a thing come down in their midst. Merchants and customers alike ran out into the street to see and hear. Frank soon explained the whole business to them, and they agreed to take care of the two prisoners while he returned for Harry and Barney.

It took them some time to get the silk and other parts of the balloon stowed away on the deck of the airship, when he did reach his friends, and when that was done night had come on again, and they decided to remain there and make an early start in the morning.

"This has been an exciting chase all the way through," said Frank Reade to Harry.

"Yes, indeed. Those two men falling from the balloon was the most extraordinary and exciting thing I ever saw in my life."

"Yes, and it's a good job for the community at large that the villains' little game has at last come to an end."

Next day, just as the sun rose from out

of the plains, the airship ascended to the distance of half a mile, and sailed away towards the east.

All day long they sailed, and when night came on they pushed on with all the speed they could command, and early the next morning came in sight of the town where the two prisoners had been left in charge of the citizens.

When the airship was sighted, the entire population turned out to welcome it.

"How are my two prisoners?" Frank asked of a miner, whom he recognised as having been one of the volunteer guard.

"Waal, I dunno," was the reply. "Ain't see'd 'em for some hours."

"But they are still here?"

"Waal, no, stranger. Fact is we hung 'em. They was hoss thieves. It's the rule to hang hoss thieves, you know," and then the miner told how the guards got drunk and the two prisoners made their escape, stole two horses, and rode like the wind. Others pursued, caught, and brought them back. The indignant people decided that it was a case of horse stealing, and that it was their duty to hang them according to the custom of the country. So they were hanged.

"We've marked their graves so you kin see 'em, pard," said the man. "They ar' thar', for I help plant 'em."

Frank looked at Harry and observed:

"I suppose we may consider ourselves lucky if we can show any of the balloon at Cranston."

"Yes, indeed," assented Harry, "and to have a chance to do so, we'd better go up again and skip."

But the well-meaning people of the place would not let them get away so easily.

They had to stay and accept the hospitalities of the town. They were feasted as the greatest adventurers of any age.

But after two days they were allowed to depart.

This time they took the balloon with them, and they were lucky to get it intact, for every man in the town was waiting to get a chance to cut out a piece of it to keep as a memento of a wonderful invention and the hanging of two men.

"Now you want to make for home as fast as you can," said Harry. "I expect my parents are very much worried over my absence. You see it has been two weeks since I have been able to write to them."

"Yes. We'll telegraph to them when we strike an office anywhere."

The day passed without their coming upon anything but settlements, at none of which did they stop.

But just as night was coming on they heard the whistle of a steam-engine. The glass enabled them to find it, and by following the railway line they found quite a lively little town.

They settled down in one of the public streets of the place, and caused the greatest sensation the town had ever seen.

Men, women, and children, flocked around the ship in the twilight of the evening, and Frank had to make a speech, explaining the expediton he was returning from.

Then every man wanted to shake his hand and call him pard.

But he told them he wanted to send dispatches east, and a great crowd escorted him and Harry to the telegraph-office, where they sent messages to Readestown and Cranston.

Then they were invited to an impromptu ball at the tavern that night, which was arranged in their honour, and they had to go and dance till after midnight.

By that time they were both pretty well tired out, and managed to get away in time to obtain a few hours' sleep on board the ship.

Early the next morning the crowd began to collect again, and Frank saw that in a few minutes they would be all over the airship without leave, so he ordered all aboard, and sent it up, followed by the shouts and protests of the crowd.

They were glad enough to get away.

The people were too demonstrative in their hospitality, and took too many liberties with the airship, and to forbid them was to insult them. To insult one was to invite a bullet.

They pushed on towards the east, and during the day passed a number of good-sized villages.

Towards evening they struck the Mississippi River, and when they saw a certain town on its left bank they knew where they were.

Early the next morning they came in sight of Cranston.

"There's Cranston!" cried Harry. "I know the dome on the courthouse. I've seen it a thousand times from the roof of the college buildings. I say, Frank, go down on the green in front of the college there. It'll make the old professors open their eyes."

An hour later the ship settled down on the green, and still another hour found a thousand people gathered around, listening to the story of the chase through the air as related by Harry.

Thorne, the banker, grasped Frank's hand, and told him to make his house his home whilst in town, and promised to pay the reward offered for the capture of the balloon robbers.

A ball was given in his honour the next night, and all the big folk of the city attended.

Two days later the young inventor was paid the rewards, and then he sailed for home, eager to be at work again on another of his wonderful schemes.

Your Editor's Corner.

Now that the winter is upon us we shall be looking out for more reading matter, and this is my excuse for telling you, my friends, about some of the companion publications of the INVENTION LIBRARY.

Take, for instance, the DIAMOND LIBRARY. This is a neat little penny book published monthly in sets of three numbers, each number containing a long, complete story. Humorous school stories, stirring detective, and dashing adventure tales all find a place in the DIAMOND LIBRARY.

Join the True Blue Brotherhood:

Three grand new numbers are now on sale—viz.: 131, "From School to Schooner"; 182, "The Vengeance of Claude Duval"; 183, "Kettle's New Chum"; and I recommend them all. The Claude Duval story is the first of a series of adventures written round the notorious cavalier-highwayman who made his name known throughout Europe. Duval was a wonderful character whose prowess was ever at the service of the weak and down-trodden, whom he championed against their wealthy oppressors.

Readers of the DIAMOND LIBRARY, by the way, are all eligible to join the True Blue Brotherhood, particulars of which will be found in most numbers of the little book.

If You Like Funny Stories.

For humorous reading we must turn to the COMIC LIBRARY. Here, again, each book contains a long, complete story which it is impossible to beat. You will find this a good time for commencing the COMIC LIBRARY, for three books of a new series will be on sale on November 7th, the titles being: 1, "Sly-shoes and the Pirate's Hoard"; 2, "The Trail of the Missing Toppers"; 3, "The Larks of Lannigan's Lambs."

It's a good idea to ask your newsagent to reserve you one or all of these books.

Detective and Adventure.

Another series you will like is the BUFFALO BILL LIBRARY, the title of which explains itself. The mighty Buffalo Bill's adventures in the Far West will appeal to readers of the INVENTION LIBRARY. Then we have the TIP TOP DETECTIVE TALES and the Boys' OWN LIBRARY. The first-named are published at a penny each, the second are large threepenny volumes containing as much reading as a five-shilling novel. Two new books are now on sale, entitled: "Ho, for the King's Highway! a Tale of Turpin's Days," and "Red Revenge; a Romance of the Prairie."

